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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a study on the role of the caseworker in the use of foster care for elderly clients. Data is drawn from 100 interviews with foster home caretakers in two major state-sponsored adult foster care programs. Findings indicate that caseworkers had not been active in the recruitment of foster home caretakers. Caretakers rarely took part in the selection of their residents. Caseworker pre-placement and follow-up visits were viewed as very important when they occurred. The data indicate the caretakers' composite picture of the ideal caseworker: one who would give a clear picture of the prospective resident, would follow up placements and would be readily available when problems arose. (Author/NW)

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Foster Care, A Sheltered Housing Alternative for the Elderly: The Interface of Client, Caseworker, and Caretaker

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Policy makers recently have begun to focus attention on the development of a variety of options in sheltered living arrangements for older persons. It is now generally recognized that if persons with a need for an intermediate level of support are to remain in the community, the heterogeneity of the elderly population requires a broad range of services and environments. One type of sheltered environment which has received little attention as a possible setting for the elderly is Adult Foster Care. Kahana and Coe in 1975 noted that "In spite of the benefits and potential feasibility of this approach, there have been few published reports of foster care programs, and research on the subject is almost non-existent." Bradshaw and her colleagues also found very little systematic attention directed to the study of foster homes as an alternative for the elderly.

As with foster families for children, in foster families for adults the client and the caretaker (i.e., the "family" members) maintain a relationship with an agency through the services of a caseworker who must supervise compliance with certain formalities and regulations, as well as provide support for the caretaker and the client. However, despite the universality of this triangular framework of client, care-

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taker and agency, even that literature on Adult Foster Care which is available contains little analysis of the significant role of the caseworker.

As part of a continuing study of adult foster care in New York State, we have previously reported on the operation of the programs and the extent to which the foster family homes are truly familial. The present paper examines the role of the caseworker in the use of foster care for elderly clients.

Interviews were conducted with foster home caretakers in the two major state-sponsored adult foster care programs--50 interviews in Board of Social Welfare/Department of Social Services Family-type homes and 50 in Department of Mental Hygiene Family-Care Homes. These 100 homes in 23 counties in northeastern New York served from one to four clients, at least one of whom was 60 or older. It should be emphasized that while the programs described are operated for adults of all ages, the present research focuses on their use by the elderly. Forty-four of the homes were age-segregated, i.e., contained only residents aged 60 or older. Forty-one homes were age-integrated (adult clients of all ages), and 15 contained only a single elderly resident. The 100 homes sampled contained a total of 232 elderly residents, the oldest of whom was 103 years of age.

Results

As in any other foster home placement, the interaction of caseworker, caretaker, and adult client can be measured at several points--

the initial recruitment of foster caretakers, selection of clients, pre-placement preparation of both client and caretaker, training for the caretakers, and follow-up supervision.

Findings indicated, first of all, that agency personnel have not been active in the recruitment of foster home caretakers. Only 14% of the caretakers studied reported recruitment as a direct result of contact with agency personnel. Seven percent had responded to ads in the media. More than half the caretakers (54%) reported that either a family member or a friend had had experience as a foster caretaker of either children or adults, and it was through this influence that these caretakers enrolled. Methods by which agency personnel can take a more active role in the recruitment process are avenues which should be explored.

After recruitment, the caseworker must match each client with an appropriate home. Only 26% of the caretakers reported that they had ever participated in the selection of their residents. The majority of the caretakers reported that they consulted with the social workers concerning the prospective residents only at the time the residents were placed in their home. (The present study design did not entail interviews with the caseworker. However, even if the caseworker perceived the preparation as more thorough, the finding that the caretaker did not, is significant.) Although in some instances caretakers reported that their relationship with the caseworker was such that the workers "knew" the type of residents they wanted, perhaps a better method would be to involve the caretakers more actively in the selection process. Since thirty-one percent of the caretakers reported that

they were looking for clients "who would fit into the home" it is appropriate for the caseworker and the caretaker to discern together what the match should be.

Eighty-two percent of the caretakers who rated pre-placement visits rated them as very important. They perceived them as valuable both for their own satisfaction and that of the potential residents. One caretaker, for example, stated that such visits help to establish whether the potential residents have the qualities the caretaker is looking for. Another explained, "It's important because the residents should have a say over where they live." Still another said it was most important for the residents who were already there to meet and to be satisfied with the prospective new resident. They felt that pre-placements visits were not employed often enough; 71% stated that they did not have a clear enough picture of potential residents before they arrived, nor did residents have a clear picture of the home in which they were to live. According to caretakers' perceptions, information provided to caretakers about the new client was often too minimal for comfortable conversation.

Two thirds of the caretakers reported they had received no training of any kind, not even informal meetings or printed material from the agency. Twenty-eight percent said they could use more help from agency personnel in matters concerned with problems of the residents and those connected with operating a foster home.

Finally, when questioned about follow-up visits and supervisory care, not surprisingly, caseworkers who can communicate on human terms and be supportive of both caretaker and client were described as more effective

than those who function solely in terms of rules and regulations.

The data indicate, then, the caretakers' composite picture of the ideal caseworker--one who would give a clear picture of the prospective resident, would follow-up the placements and would be readily available when problems arose. In sum, a possible direction for future efforts in strengthening Foster Family Care for Adults programs is to focus on the role of the caseworker as she facilitates interaction between caretaker and client. In order to maximize such interactions, caseworkers need a clear picture of their own role and of the expectations held by agency, caretaker and client.

A footnote to our study might be mentioned here, which indicates its public policy relevance. We have recently negotiated a contract with the New York State Department of Social Services to provide training in just the areas stated above. That is, as part of their efforts to expand and improve their foster care program, Social Services has requested us to train caseworkers in the local districts in order to improve recruitment, placement, training and supervision in the Foster Family Care program. To complement these efforts we have also contracted to provide a self-instructional training program for the caretakers themselves.